

Frequently Asked Questions

Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission

Agricultural & Open Space Preservation Policy

The questions and answers below pertain to the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) and the Commission's Agricultural & Open Space Preservation Policy (AOSPP).

What is a Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO)?

LAFCO is an independent regulatory agency that receives its powers directly from the California State Legislature. LAFCO regulates the boundaries of cities and most special districts under its jurisdiction, encourages orderly boundaries, ensures the efficient delivery of services, discourages urban sprawl, and preserves agricultural lands and open space.

What Does LAFCO Do?

LAFCO is responsible for reviewing proposed jurisdictional boundary changes including annexations and detachments to/from cities and special districts, incorporation of new cities, formation of new special districts, and the consolidation, merger, and dissolution of existing special districts. LAFCO is also responsible for reviewing extraterritorial service agreements between local governmental agencies and establishing and reviewing spheres of influence (SOIs) for cities and special districts. LAFCO has authority to approve a proposal, with or without conditions, or deny a proposal.

Who Runs LAFCO?

Contra Costa LAFCO is composed of seven regular commissioners: two members from the County Board of Supervisors; two members who represent cities in the county; two members who represent independent special districts in the county, and one public member. There are also four alternate commissioners, one from each of the above categories. LAFCO staff consists of an Executive Officer, LAFCO Clerk, legal counsel and various support services provided under contracts.

Why Does LAFCO Have an AOSPP?

One of LAFCO's responsibilities is to protect agricultural lands and open space. Agriculture and open space are vital to Contra Costa County and offer environmental, economic, quality of life and other benefits.

Does LAFCO's AOSPP Prioritize the Preservation of Agricultural and Open Space Lands Over Orderly Growth and Development?

No. LAFCO is charged with balancing sometimes competing state interests of orderly development with discouraging urban sprawl, preserving open space and agricultural land, and efficiently extending government services. The AOSPP focuses primarily on the preservation of agricultural and open space lands. Contra Costa LAFCO has a multitude of other policies and procedures that deal with orderly growth and development, the extension of services, and numerous other issues.

What is the Purpose of LAFCO's AOSPP?

The purpose of LAFCO's AOSPP is to 1) provide guidance to an applicant on how to assess the impacts on agricultural and/or open space lands of applications submitted to LAFCO, and to explain

how the applicant intends to mitigate those impacts; 2) provide a framework for LAFCO to evaluate, and process in a consistent manner, applications before LAFCO that involve or impact and/or open space lands; and 3) explain to the public how LAFCO will evaluate and assess applications that affect agricultural and/or open space lands.

What Will I Find in LAFCO's AOSPP?

LAFCO's AOSPP contains Goals, Policies and Guidelines. The *Goals* support the importance of agriculture and open space lands in Contra Costa County, and help guide LAFCO's decisions regarding boundary changes and the preservation of agricultural and open space lands. The *Policies* provide for a mitigation hierarchy which 1) encourages avoidance of impacts to prime agricultural, agricultural and open space lands, 2) minimizes impacts to these lands, and 3) mitigates impacts that cannot be avoided while pursuing orderly growth and development. The *Guidelines* provide further direction regarding the application of LAFCO's Goals and Policies; advise and assist the public, agencies, property owners, farmers, ranchers and other stakeholders with regard to LAFCO's expectations in reviewing an application that involves agricultural and/or open space lands; and provides sample mitigation measures to address such lands. In addition, the AOSPP contains some general observations as "food for thought." Nothing in LAFCO's AOSPP is construed to automatically disqualify an application.

Can LAFCO stop me from selling my agricultural land to a developer?

No. LAFCO has no direct land use authority and has no role in who owns land. LAFCO's AOSPP encourages mitigation that will result from a LAFCO approval that will lead to the conversion of prime agricultural, agricultural, and open space lands to at least the degree specified in the AOSPP.

Can LAFCO's AOSPP force me to put a conservation easement on my property?

No. LAFCO's policy will require that a LAFCO application that will convert agricultural and/or open space land to an urban use mitigate for the loss of land (e.g., paying a fee, purchasing a conservation easement from a willing farmer or rancher, otherwise supporting agriculture business, etc.).

Do agricultural conservation easements allow public access on my land?

Public access may be allowed but is not a required component of an agricultural conservation easement. An agricultural conservation easement is an agreement between a willing farmer or rancher and a land trust. Farmers and ranchers can negotiate various easement terms, including whether to allow public access. Most agricultural conservation easements do not allow public access.

Do agricultural conservation easements restrict the way that farmers can farm?

The property owner and the land trust negotiate the terms of the easements. Current agricultural easements in East Contra Costa County provide farmers with broad discretion in how they farm their land.

LAFCO's AOSPP Requires a Land Use Inventory. Where Can I Find This Information?

LAFCO's AOSPP requests that the applicant reference and include a land use inventory that indicates the amount of available land within the subject jurisdiction *for the proposed land use*. The land use inventory may be one that has been prepared by the applicable land use agency. The County and cities are required to prepare a Housing Element, which includes a "Sites Inventory and Analysis." In

addition, many counties and cities maintain GIS data layers which include an inventory of vacant parcels.

LAFCO Requires an Agricultural and Open Space Impact Assessment as Part of an Application to LAFCO. What if the Applicant Fails to Complete, or Partially Completes the Assessment?

Depending on the nature of the proposal, the application may be deemed incomplete until the needed information is provided. LAFCO staff is available for pre-application meetings and to assist with applications. There is no fee for these services.

What If My Application to LAFCO Will Convert Agricultural or Open Space Land to a Non-Agricultural or Non-Open Space use – Can LAFCO Impose Mitigation Measures?

LAFCO can impose terms and conditions on any proposal, including, but not limited to, those measures identified in the AOSPP.

What if the Application to LAFCO Will Convert Agricultural or Open Space Land to a Non-Agricultural or Non-Open Space use, and the Applicant Has Already Paid an Agricultural Mitigation Fee (e.g., City of Brentwood) and/or Paid into a Comparable Conservation Program (e.g., East Contra Costa County Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Community Conservation Plan)? Will LAFCO Take This Into Consideration? Can LAFCO Impose Additional Measures?

Yes. These types of measures are recognized and included among LAFCO's list of sample mitigation measures and LAFCO can consider these as mitigation. Yes, LAFCO can impose additional mitigation measures if it believes that the proposed measures do not adequately mitigate the impacts to agricultural and/or open space lands.

What if Only a Portion of My Project Area Impacts Agricultural or Open Space Land?

LAFCO considers each application on its own merits. When reviewing an application, LAFCO must consider at least 16 different factors, one of which is "the effect of the proposal on maintaining the physical and economic integrity of agricultural lands..." No one factor is determinative. The AOSPP will apply only to the portion of the project area that consists of prime agricultural, agricultural, or open space land.

What if the Project Area is Currently Designated for an Agricultural or Open Space Use (by the County), and the Annexing City has Pre-Zoned the Project Area for a Non-Agricultural or Open Space Use – Can LAFCO Deny the City's Request to Annex the Property?

Yes. LAFCO has broad discretion to approve, with or without conditions, or deny a proposal. The applicability of the AOSPP to a parcel is determined by several factors and zoning is only one of these factors.

What if the Project Area is Currently Designated for an Agricultural or Open Space Use, and is Within a Voter Approved Urban Limit Line – Can LAFCO Deny the Request to Annex the Property?

Yes. LAFCO has broad discretion to approve, with or without conditions, or deny a proposal. LAFCO consider the location of a parcel vis-a-vis urban limit lines and urban growth boundaries as a factor in its deliberations.